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ABSTRACT

The sex of college freshmen theme writers was identified by analyzing subject matter clues. A sample of 60 descriptive themes was selected for study; half were written by females and half by males. A panel of five female and five male English teachers read the themes and indicated the sex they thought the writers to be as well as the reasons for their decisions. The panel was able to make correct decisions in a significant number of cases. The reasons the panel made their decisions were evaluated as possible criteria for the identification of the sex of the writers. A detailed examination is made of one criteria: sex-based interests, which is divided into the categories of "occupations," "activities," and "environment." (SW)

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SUBJECT MATTER CLUES TO THE SEX OF THE WRITERS OF DESCRIPTIVE THEMES

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Women's language is a field which is receiving special attention in these days when women are becoming increasingly aware of themselves and their position in society. Many linguists have studied the ways in which the grammar and syntax of the English language act against women. Of course, the most obvious example is the use of he as a generic. People interested in speech have studied phonetic differences and differences which appear in conversations. Little work has been done with written English. The vocabulary and forms of language used in written compositions such as are assigned a part of freshman composition courses are more limited then the various aspects of spoken English, but the speakers of written work are in complete control of what they say and are not influenced by interruptions or immediate reactions to what they are writing.

I decided to study the written language of freshman attending Middle Tennessee State University. Rather than set up an artificial situation, I chose papers which had been written as part of the regular course work. Fortunately, I had not read Robin Lakoff's Language and Women's Place where she says "In particular, freshman composition style is notorious for its awkward formality, owing to uneasiness in writing, and is the last place one would look for personal characterization, indicative of the writer's feeling of comfortable rapport with the potential reader." Had I known I was looking in "the last place," I might have reconsidered. That would have been unfortunate since the sixty themes I used were anything but formal, and many of the themes displayed a closeness to the reader which can only be described as friendly and even in some instances intimate. This might be true because the themes chosen were descriptive themes, many of which had been written early in the semester. Lakoff might have been referring only to analytical themes in which freshmen, unfamiliar with this genre, might evidence more awkwardness and formality than in descriptive themes. Half of the sixty themes (chosen as the sample) were written by females and half by males. All writers were college-age native speakers of English.

The sixty themes were typed exactly as they had appeared originally; no changes were made. They were numbered alphabetically and the identities of the writers were kept separate. Copies of the sixty typed themes were then turned over to a panel of five female and five male English faculty members with a variety of experience with freshman themes.

Each panel member was asked to indicate on forms provided what that member thought to be the sex of each writer. The panel members were asked to comment on the reasons for decision wherever possible.

A statistical analysis of the total number of correct decisions indicated that the panel was able to make correct decisions in a significant number of cases. However, establishing that people familiar with freshmen composition could identify the sex of the writers of freshmen themes, was only a small part of what I intended to do. I was more interested in why the panel made the decisions they made and if, in fact, their reasons provided valid criteria for the identification of the sex of writers.

The remainder of this paper concerns the first of eight criteria: sex based interests. This criterion concerns what is said (the subject matter) rather than how it is said.

This criterion will be discussed under three headings: occupations, activities, and environment.

We all know certain occupations are considered for males and others for females. "Pilots are more likely to be males," panel member 3 said in commenting on why she felt that Theme 36 had been written by a male. All the panel members said Theme 36 had been written by a male, and they were right. Several members commented "subject matter" or "content," but panel member 3 was the most specific. The writer of Theme 36 provides technical observations about flying. He says, "If you climb to an altitude of ten thousand feet and fly Northwest [sic] for ten or fifteen miles, you can make a turn of 90 degrees and see both Murfreesboro and Nashville!!! [sic]." Since being a pilot is considered a male activity, the reader of a theme describing flying a non-commercial aircraft and using technical terms associated with the occupation will consider the theme to be written by a male.

Farmers are also considered male. Theme 9 describes a barn. It is another

theme about which the panel was unanimously correct. Panel member 1 explains that she sees the theme as a "detailed description typical of what is of interest to a boy." Panel member 8 comments on the "Professional' detail about [the] barn." Other comments are similar. What is important is not that the barn is a particular place, but rather that it is a place viewed as the setting of a male occupation (i. e. farming). A sample of the technical material included in Theme 9 follows: "On the southside [sic] you would find three stables holding livestock. Each [of the] stables contains [a] [n] hay trough, feed trough, and a [n] automatic watering trough... The north side contains hay troughs to feed as many as twenty-five head at one time. Next to [the] inner wall is a loading range and a cut gate."

While it is no doubt true that many women are involved in farming, it is generally accepted that the farmer is a man, and the woman involved in farming is the farmer's wife or the farmer's daughter. Taking farming as a serious occupation is usually considered a male trait. Therefore, a description of technical aspects of farming is assumed to be written by a male.

Women, on the other hand, are relegated to the role of housewife or housekeeper. Theme 21 says, "The large windows were always a chore to clean," and the mention of a housekeeping chore which the writer admits to performing marks this theme as female. The writer of Theme 33 says, "I eat most of my meals in my room, so that's why I consider it a kitchen. I have a refrigerator, an oven, and a hot plate, so it is almost like any ordinary kitchen." Few men on campus cook most of their meals and those who do seldom talk about it. While anyone could compare this room to "any ordinary kitchen," probably only a housewife or housekeeper would.

Sex-based occupational interests are no doubt a greater indicator of sex than these few themes illustrate. One must remember in considering this criterion that the themes are descriptions of places and not of occupations. All references to occupations are incidental. A study of themes written about occupations or of the "career booklets" made in many high schools would no doubt show occupations to be a greater indicator of the sex of the writers than they are here.

The activity most often mentioned by the panel was "slumber party" from Theme 17. This theme was unanimously identified as female by the panel. The expression

"When I have a slumber party" was given as the reason for the decisions in most cases, when a reason was given. Slumber parties are a female activity. Males have some of the boys for over-night, but they do not identify the activity as a slumber party. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language defines slumber party as "a house party at which young teenage girls, dressed in night clothes, spend much of the night in talk, eating, games, etc."

Another activity identified as female in Theme 17 is dancing. It should be noted that this theme refers to dancing with friends in one's bedroom. This type of dancing is considered female. This is not to say that men do not dance in night clubs and at proms and other dances, but rather that they do not dance in their bedrooms. A theme written by a male makes it clear that dancing in other places is not exclusively feminine. "Night joints seem to be the only place to go in the city. . . . They supply intertainment [sic] , beverages, and a nice place to dance." "Tuesday[']s bridge club" (Theme 4) was repeatedly mentioned as the reason for assigning Theme 4 to a female writer. All ten panel members marked "F" for Theme 4. Since many men play bridge, there are restrictions on this activity similar to those held on dancing. First, this is a regular organized weekly activity called a club. While men play bridge, women are connected with bridge clubs. Second, this bridge-playing takes place in a small town. Men in small towns are less likely to play "citified" --even "sissy"--card games like bridge. They are more likely to play poker. (The male who wrote Theme 24 just referred to playing cards, without naming the game, thereby making what could be considered an indicator of sex.) Third, the context in which the term appears is "you will have to stand up for yourself at Tuesday[']s bridge club." The implication here is that the bridge club is a place of gossip. Females are stereotyped as gossips even though men are equally likely to "repeat idle talk and rumors, esp. [sic] about the private affairs of others." Males can mention gossips, as a male writer did in another theme, without losing their maleness, but the gossips must be others (presemably women) overheard as they are in the library in another theme written by a male.

Theme 8, entitled "Murphy Center," was identified by 100 percent of the panel as being male, as it was. The emphasis on athletics was most often noted as the reason

for the decisions. The male who wrote Theme 8 displays technical knowledge about Middle Tennessee State University's athletic center: "Even the floor on which the game is being played is something special. Murphy Center has a rubberized floor. This is something which is pretty rare. This floor, being rubber, is supposed to give with the players[']s feet. This helps cut down on the number of leg and ankle injuries." He refers to the athletic coaches, Jimmy Earle and Ben Hurt, by name, without identifying their functions. His interest in athletics is such that he assumes that everyone knows who these men are. The mention of one specific athletic activity, weight lifting, was most often given as the reason for a choice of "M." Unlike slumber party, weight lifting does not contain an identification of only male participants in its definition. However, in practice, few women lift weights. (The presence of weight lifting devices and their use in programs of weight loss at many spas may change this. At present, however, the activity is considered exclusively for the muscle-bound male.)

Theme 10 was correctly identified as male by 90 percent of the panel. The reasons most often given refer to the following paragraph: "THS has an outstanding atheletic [sic] program. The school has some of the best facilities in the state for baseball and football on the high school level. About one-sixty [sic] of the THS faculty are coaches."

Theme 53 talks about a high school athletic program. "Going on around the campus we find the gym, where the basketball games are often held. Inside the gym we find two offices and [a] bathroom. As you walk through the door to the gym [there] are some steps. These steps are often blocked off unless they have a big game, then these steps are used to reach the balcony." This theme was written by a female but was incorrectly identified as male by 90 percent of the panel. The reason most often given for the incorrect identification was the emphasis on athletics. The incorrect decisions of the panel are very important. In this case, they reflect a stereotype which can be incorrect and therefore might need to be reexamined. Also the consistent use of this criterion, regardless of its relation to fact, demonstrates that it operates in the panel's imagination.

Shopping was more often identified as a female activity. The three themes

written by females which mention shopping (Themes 3, 7, and 13) were correctly identified by 60 percent of the panel. The one theme mentioning shopping written by a male (Theme 5) was correctly identified by 80 percent of the panel. One reason may be that, unlike the females', the male's reference is not personal. "Everyone goes shoping [sic] in the big mall that is close to their [sic] house instead of going in to the city where there are big stores that used to get all the business."

These examples show that the mere mention of certain activities does not mark a theme as male or female, but it is rather the context in which the items are mentioned that makes the identification.

The sixty themes used on this research are descriptions of places. Since the students were free to choose the places they described, the choices themselves could serve to identify the sex of the writers.

One-sixth of the themes described bedrooms. Five were written by males and five by females. Since all college-age students have bedrooms it is not surprising that many of them choose to describe bedrooms, and that this choice was not sex-linked.

One-sixth of the themes were written about houses. Four of these used the neutral term house exclusively. Two were male and two female. Four used the term home. Three of these were female and the panel mentioned the term home as the reason for several of their decisions concerning these three themes. The male who used home, used the modified form old home place which was not considered female. Two themes mentioned dream houses. Both were identified as female even though one had been written by a male.

Fourteen of the themes were about a variety of other types of rooms and buildings. The barn and athletic center have already been mentioned because of their activities so that the place itself is less important than other subject matter clues. It is impossible to say that any of the other rooms or buildings are sex-linked since they differ so widely and since other subject matter clues overshadow that of environment.

Eleven themes were written about communities. The panel expected females to write more often about small towns and males to write more often about cities and they did.

The remaining thirteen were written about places close to nature. Eight were written by females. Concern with nature was considered a female trait and when men describe nature they are more likely to take well-known natural beauties.

Identifying the sex of the writers of descriptive themes using subject matter clues is using an easy, commonsensical, stereotyped type of analysis. Nevertheless it is a rather effective way to identify the sex of the writer. But as a criterion, the mere mention of certain occupations, activities, and environments is not as reliable as a consideration of these things in light of the context in which they are presented.